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SUBJECT: LEBANON: CUSTOMS PLANS A COMPLICATED FIGHT AGAINST
ARMS SMUGGLING

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason: 1.4 (d)

Summary

1. (S) Although our GOL senior and political interlocutors have spoken with less than a unified voice on arms smuggling into Lebanon, we have heard about both success stories and chronic problems about this issue from Lebanon's customs services. While positive developments have been hard to confirm, it seems that at some level Lebanon is trying to come to grips with the smuggling issue. Nevertheless, the task of securing Lebanon's border with Syria is complicated by both politics and geography. Long-standing smuggling routes abound, and they are important to some Lebanese as the cross-border economic, political, and confessional ties between Syrians and Lebanese often bypass the official boundary lines. End Summary.

Customs and Arms Smuggling

2. (C) The head of the Lebanese Customs Brigade Major Ayman Ibrahim shared with Pol/Econ Chief and FSNs the GOL's recent efforts to control the border and stop arms smuggling. Ibrahim expressed optimism that PM Siniora's new directives will help contain possible arms smuggling via hundreds of illegal land crossings.

3. (C) Ibrahim noted efforts to crack down on smuggling, including the PM's formation of a special interagency committee the third week of August to examine and implement ways to monitor land, maritime and air borders. Ibrahim noted that the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) deployment of 8,600 soldiers last week along the land border in the north and Bekaa region should help to control arms smuggling. The LAF's role will be to monitor illegal crossings in a variety of terrain, and to bolster customs brigade personnel at official crossing points. Customs teams are visiting the four official land crossings at Arida, Abboudieh, Kaa, and Masnaa this week to examine the implementation of control measures on the ground, Ibrahim told us.

4. (C) It is doubtful that smugglers would attempt to pass weapons via these official crossings, Ibrahim said. It is far more likely that smugglers would use, or are using, illegal crossing points including unofficial, unpaved roads and paths that crisscross the border, as well as the numerous villages that lie astride the border. These factors, as well

as political and militia interference from at least the time of the Lebanese Civil War on, have made the border extremely porous. Further complicating the situation is the fact, Ibrahim asserted, that, because of the mountainous topography, travel between many Lebanese villages requires the use of roads and routes that pass through Syrian territory. All in all, the task of shutting down the weapons flow is complex and difficult.

15. (C) Ibrahim showed us several heavily-penciled maps showing dozens of known or suspected clandestine entry routes. Many of these appeared to be close enough to official crossings, highways and towns that they would be obvious to a careful observer on the ground. The German technical assistance to Lebanese customs enforcement will not solve this problem, Ibrahim explained. The equipment and training the Customs Brigade expects to receive is planned at seven sites only -- the four official land crossings, the Ports of Beirut and Tripoli, and the Beirut International Airport.

Syria's Legacy

16. (C) Illegal crossings in the areas of Hermel, Baalbek and Rachaya are most prone to arms smuggling, according to Ibrahim, because of the local inhabitants' strong ties to the Syrian regime. He explained that those three areas have remained uncontrolled and open from the Syrian side of the border even after the pullout of Syrian troops in spring 2005. By comparison, Syrian forces had constructed sand berms in Ersal and Anjar -- Lebanese territory according to Ibrahim -- for fear of weapons smuggling in the opposite direction; i.e., from Lebanon to Syria to support factions

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opposed to the regime in Damascus. To deal with these complex issues, a joint Lebanese-Syrian committee had been formed and was looking into improving border control and addressing irregularities in Syrian procedures when hostilities broke out between Israel and Lebanon in July.

17. (C) Lebanese Customs' 600 anti-smuggling personnel have seized no weapons before or since the withdrawal of the Syrian army, Ibrahim offered. "Weapons were never smuggled into Lebanon, but rather came through official crossings, mainly the military road," he said. This military road, which is situated near the Masnaa crossing, was at no point under the control of Lebanese Customs. The Syrian army controlled the road until its withdrawal from Lebanon, at which point the LAF took control. The road was reportedly shut completely in December 2005 following the assassination of Lebanese MP Gibran Tuani.

Comment

18. (S) A mid-level career official, Major Ibrahim appeared to offer us a candid and unvarnished view of the practical problems facing the GOL as it seeks to cut off Hizballah's arms shipments, and he seemed to be grappling seriously with his difficult task. Furthermore, he understood the difference between economic smuggling and arms smuggling and grasped the importance of the latter. It was refreshing to hear a pragmatic point of view on the subject, given that most of our senior interlocutors in the period since the cessation of hostilities have appeared unwilling to address the issue head-on. Our discussions with quite a few political leaders have been marked by their excuses, pleading for more time or technical assistance, indulgence in conspiracy theories, and rhetorical comparisons to USG authorities' inability to control the Mexico border.

19. (S) Yet, even though choking the arms shipments will ultimately require a feat of political will at the top levels, there may be signs that the LAF and Customs Brigade

will fight smuggling squarely on the local and operational level. Assuming some level of discipline, the LAF's mere presence may make arms smuggling a more costly and difficult affair at least, and sensitizing Customs to the importance of arms smuggling can only help. In addition, where they are stationed, UNIFIL and other foreign observers, technicians and trainers might deter some smuggling. There have been a few unconfirmed "success stories" in recent days which have reached us from the press or from contacts. In short, asking politicians to take on Hezbollah's arms smuggling has been like asking them to take on Hizballah itself, but Lebanon's embattled security institutions may yet produce enough progress on this issue to create some confidence in the international community.

110. (C) This Embassy has provided USG-sponsored customs training to GOL officials in the past, including programs that were carried out in Jordan and Kuwait, and we plan to continue to do so in the future. On a different subject, customs officials have been among our best GOL contacts in trying to crack down on IPR violations. We hope that they will apply the same diligence they used in reducing the import of pirated products to combatting arms smuggling. End Comment.
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